



Digital Collections @ Dordt

Study Guides for Faith & Science Integration

Summer 2017

How Can Christians Understand the Idea of Human Evolution? (Leader's Guide)

Robbin Eppinga

Dordt College, robbin.eppinga@dordt.edu

Lydia Marcus

Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faith_science



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Commons](#), [Life Sciences Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Eppinga, R., & Marcus, L. (2017). How Can Christians Understand the Idea of Human Evolution? (Leader's Guide). Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faith_science/18

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Study Guides for Faith & Science Integration by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Leader's Guide to

How Can Christians Understand the Idea of Human Evolution?

A Study of Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind

Dr. Robbin Eppinga, Lydia Marcus
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa
Summer 2017

How to Use This Material?

This study of human evolution using Yuval Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* consists of 5 modules. Each module contains two sections. The first section presents a set of Reading and Reflection questions that are to be completed before each meeting and are meant to help the participant wrestle with the concepts introduced in that week's chapters. The second section consists of two (or more) Discussion questions, which will be written by the participants and the leader as they read. Both sets of questions are meant to foster discussion, but your group should by no means limit itself to the questions contained in these sections.

This study is intended for **informal, small group** discussion, such as that of a Bible study or small group. The themes presented in each submodule may be unpacked on its own, but it is the hope of the authors that the entire study may be useful to the interested reader (leader and participant alike). The study is also aimed toward **high school students, college students, and post-college adults** with an interest in how science and the Christian faith interact.

As you read, it is our hope that you will come across (and come up with) questions which challenge you, both in understanding your personal faith and in understanding science. In these questions, you will have the opportunity to grow through asking and answering these questions: Why has the church historically believed in *this* answer or *that* answer? How might you be challenged to defend your answer?

Planning and Preparing for a Session

The material assumes that each session will last for about 45-60 minutes. It also assumes that each participant will have read the assigned chapter(s) and considered the Reading and Reflection questions ahead of time.

It must also be noted that the provided discussion questions are intended as a guide for your discussion, but you should by no means restrict your discussion to these questions. Try to keep your group's discussion relevant to the general themes addressed in the module, but be flexible.

Equipped for Service

This “Leader’s Guide” is meant to **equip leaders** of these small group discussions, and thus the following pages are far more detailed and expansive than the average participant may judge necessary for complex discussion. We offer information from other references and suggested answers to questions posed in the text. This has been done in the hope that you, as the leader, may more easily facilitate and moderate discussion amongst your peers in the small group. Your small group may be made up of the generation that initiates change in how the common Christian comes to understand these questions and answer – in the service of your peers, do not underestimate your own significance as a leader or co-leader.

Who is the author of *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*?

Yuval Harari is a professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is most known for his books about human evolution and history, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, which are international bestsellers. Harari was born in Israel, and he earned his Doctor of Philosophy degree from Jesus College, Oxford, in 2002. Harari has long been interested in how *Homo sapiens* has reached its current state, and he has spent much time considering the relationship between biology (or natural history) and history.

It is significant for readers to be aware that Harari is not a Christian. Indeed, one lecturer noted that Harari "presumes that Christianity is a failed myth which means it can be treated as an interesting artifact" (see "Stories for a Post-Christian Age: Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*" by David K. Weber, 2016, http://thecresset.org/2015/Michaelmas/Weber_M15.html). However, he asks many of the big questions that Christians should be prepared to answer, including how one should understand human evolution (and what happened to the Neanderthals), why money is so important in our culture, the role that empires have played in the spreading of religion, and the implications of bionic humanity.

Table of Contents

How to Use This Material?	2
Planning and Preparing for a Session	3
Equipped for Service	3
Who is the author of <i>Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind</i> ?	4
Module 1: The Cognitive Revolution	7
Reading and Reflection	7
<i>"The Animal of No Significance"</i>	7
<i>"The Tree of Knowledge"</i>	8
<i>"A Day in the Life of Adam and Eve"</i>	8
<i>"The Flood"</i>	9
Discussion Questions	10
Module 2: The Agricultural Revolution.....	11
Reading and Reflection	11
<i>"History's Biggest Fraud"</i>	11
<i>"Building Pyramids"</i>	11
<i>"Memory Overload"</i>	12
<i>"There is No Justice in History"</i>	13
Discussion Questions	13
Module 3: The Unification of Humankind	14
Reading and Reflection	14
<i>"The Arrow of History"</i>	14
<i>"The Scent of Money"</i>	14
<i>"Imperial Visions"</i>	14
<i>"The Law of Religion"</i>	15
<i>"The Secret of Success"</i>	16
Discussion Questions	16
Module 4: The Scientific Revolution.....	17
Reading and Reflection	17
<i>"The Discovery of Ignorance"</i>	17
<i>"The Marriage of Science and Empire"</i>	18
<i>"The Capitalist Creed"</i>	18
<i>"The Wheels of Industry"</i>	19
Discussion Questions	19
Module 5: The Modern World	20
Reading and Reflection	20
<i>"A Permanent Revolution"</i>	20
<i>"And They Lived Happily Ever After"</i>	20
<i>"The End of Homo Sapiens"</i>	21

<i>“Afterword: The Animal that Became a God”</i>	22
Discussion Questions	22
Bibliography	23

Module 1: The Cognitive Revolution

Chapters covered: “The Animal of No Significance,” “The Tree of Knowledge,” “A Day in the Life of Adam and Eve,” and “The Flood”

Reading and Reflection

“The Animal of No Significance”

1. What do you think of Harari’s introduction? What does it tell you about the assumptions Harari will make throughout the book? Do you agree with these assumptions? Why or why not?

Suggested Answer: Harari assumes that the universe originated because of the Big Bang, that the universe is billions of years old, and that geological, chemical, and biological evolution took place.

2. What do you think of the idea that there once existed “animals much like modern humans” (3)? How do you think these animals were distinct from modern humans? What do you think of the idea that we are biologically related to chimpanzees and other great apes?

3. What do you think of Harari’s assessment that Sapiens (that is, humankind as we know it) is unlikely to survive for 2 million years? What would you guess the life expectancy of the human race to be? How does this fit with your understanding of humanity’s (and Creation’s) relationship with God?

Suggested Answer: We do not often think of humankind as a species with an expiration date. Do you believe that God will return before humans wipe themselves out? Why do you think that Harari believes that humankind will be a relatively short-lived species?

4. What is the Interbreeding Theory? What is the Replacement Theory?

Suggested Answer: Interbreeding Theory suggests that Sapiens immigrated into parts of the world inhabited by Neanderthals and bred with them, merging the two populations.

Replacement Theory suggests that Sapiens and Neanderthals were incompatible in every regard, so Sapiens (the more adept sibling) killed off all other humans.

“The Tree of Knowledge”

1. What do you think about the apparent centrality of gossip to human development and linguistics?

2. What do you think of Harari’s statement that “Large numbers of strangers can cooperate successfully by believing in common myths” (27)? How do you define *myth*? How do you think Harari defines *myth*?

Suggested Answer: Common visions or shared experiences (or worldviews) are very powerful tools for unification. Harari likely defines myth as “an idea or set of ideas that tells people something about the nature of reality,” or something along those lines. Myths are not necessarily wholly untruthful. This is slightly different from the way we more often define myth: “a popular but false idea.”

3. Do you think that Harari holds a worldview of scientism (the belief that science is the only source of truth, that empiricism is the only way of knowing anything)? Why or why not?

Suggested Answer: Harari seems to have a healthy conception of the importance of non-physical, non-empirical things in the development of humankind. Based on the content of *Sapiens* thus far, I would say that Harari is not a believer in scientism.

“A Day in the Life of Adam and Eve”

1. Why do you think that Harari chose to title this chapter “A Day in the Life of Adam and Eve”? Is it a fitting title? How does this discussion of early human activity fit with your understanding of human history?

Suggested Answer: Many people grew up believing Adam and Eve to be the first humans in existence, so the whole premise of Harari's book may seem to threaten people's prior conceptions of Adam and Eve. It is probably a good idea to come back to the question "how do you understand the story of Adam and Eve" a few times throughout this book discussion, because people's opinions may change over time. Harari's title is relevant, if provocative.

2. What do you think of the statement, "The world does not revolve around humans or around any other particular group of beings" (54)? (Here Harari is describing animists.)

Suggested Answer: This sentiment is fairly consistent with a Christian worldview, though animism is not; God is the primary mover in Creation.

"The Flood"

1. Do you think that humans are "the deadliest species" on Earth? Why or why not? If you think that we are, how does that align with our God-given responsibility to Creation?

Suggested Answer: We were commanded to fill the earth and subdue it, but it looks as though, whenever we fill more of the earth, we end up killing a significant portion of its life. What do we do with this bit of information?

2. Have humans ever been good stewards of Creation? Is it possible for humankind to "live in harmony with nature"? Are humans morally culpable even if they did not intentionally drive hundreds of species to extinction?

3. What do you think of Harari's chapter title? How does it relate to the content of the chapter?

Suggested Answer: For Harari, humankind is "the flood" that exterminated large quantities of species. Following a chapter whose title referenced Adam and Eve, it seems as though Harari is mimicking the early chapters of Genesis. Why might he be doing this?

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about ideas presented in this week's assigned chapters.

1.

2.

Module 2: The Agricultural Revolution

Chapters covered: “History’s Biggest Fraud,” “Building Pyramids,” “Memory Overload,” and “There is no Justice in History”

Reading and Reflection

“History’s Biggest Fraud”

1. Was the agricultural revolution worth it? Why or why not?
2. How should we respond to modern “luxury traps”? How should we view progress?
3. What do you think of Harari’s assessment of the moral pitfalls of modern animal agriculture?

Suggested Answer: Harari clearly feels strongly about this subject. His views on our treatment of domesticated animals impact his lifestyle: he is a vegan. Do you think his summaries of animal treatment are accurate?

“Building Pyramids”

1. Are principles of justice myths? Why or why not?

2. What do you think of the “according to the science of biology...” statements Harari makes on page 109? Are they accurate? Are those statements really within the scope of biology?

Suggested Answer: Science does not and cannot tell us that there is no Creator. Similarly, Harari should really define what he means by “created” so we can understand what he means by “people were not ‘created’” (109). It seems as though Harari understands “created” to mean a “divine intervention in which the Creator acted contrary to the usual natural patterns His Creation follows” (or something similar). Many Christian scientists would say that people are both products of evolutionary processes and creations, in that God is responsible for the evolution of humankind. Harari seems to understand “equal” to mean “equal in ability,” whereas others may understand “equal” to mean “equal in worth” (Harari acknowledges this later in the section).

3. Do you agree with Harari’s discussion of myths? What “myths” (as Harari understands the concept of “myth”) do you participate in? What value do you see in these myths?

Suggested Answer: Though most participants will not appreciate Harari calling Christianity a “myth,” his discussion of the seemingly arbitrary nature of principles we hold dearly (e.g. individualism, rights, pursuit of happiness, private property) is enlightening. It is important to remember that the way we view and value the world is deeply impacted by the culture we live in.

“Memory Overload”

1. What do you think of the idea that the subjective-ness of human truth is the source of humanity’s struggle to obey laws?

2. What do you think of Harari’s concluding sentence (“When humans try to regain control of the rebellious script, it responds by attempting to wipe out the human race”) (132)? Do you think that this is a real danger? Are we becoming subservient to number-based machinery?

“There is No Justice in History”

1. What do you think of Harari’s discussion of rape, particularly in the context of the Old Testament (145)?

Suggested Answer: Old Testament laws can be difficult to understand and reconcile with our modern understanding of justice. Does the command about rape found in Deuteronomy seem just to you? Can understandings of justice change as cultures change? Should they?

2. “Whatever is possible is by definition also natural” (147). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? How does this impact your view of the basis of morality? Is what is natural also good?

Suggested Answer: Though this is proof texting in the sense that Paul is not addressing the natural versus the unnatural in this passage, Harari’s discussion reminds me a bit of 1 Corinthians 10:23, “ ‘I have the right to do anything,’ you say—but not everything is beneficial. ‘I have the right to do anything’—but not everything is constructive” (NIV). There seems to be a difference between what Harari defines as “natural” and what is understood to be good.

3. Does God dislike development? (See page 148, in which Harari indicates that development in Creation is not aligned with God’s original plan for Creation.)

4. Do you agree that there is no justice in history?

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about ideas presented in this week’s assigned chapters.

- 1.
- 2.

Module 3: The Unification of Humankind

Chapters covered: “The Arrow of History,” “The Scent of Money,” “Imperial Visions,” “The Law of Religion,” and “The Secret of Success”

Reading and Reflection

“The Arrow of History”

1. Is the globalization Harari speaks of akin to a modern Tower of Babel? What is the goal of globalization? (Does globalization have a goal?) Is globalization a good thing?

“The Scent of Money”

1. Do you agree that “money is the most universal and most efficient system of mutual trust ever devised” (180)? What other systems seem to be universal?

Suggested Answer: Yes, monetary systems are complex and impressively successful.

2. What role does trust play in monetary systems? Is that degree of trust okay? Why is money’s ability to unify people or gain people’s trust apparently stronger than religion’s ability to do the same?

Suggested Answer: Monetary systems are founded on trust; Harari would suggest that most every aspect of the human experience (e.g. culture) is founded on trust. Is it good to have such trust in systems? Is it necessary? What would it be like if we were less inclined to trust systems? Why is money such a good motivator?

“Imperial Visions”

1. Do you think that imperialism is bad? Is it good? Is it Godly?

“The Law of Religion”

1. Do you agree with Harari’s definition of religion (“a system of human norms and values that is founded on a belief in a superhuman order”) (210)? Is the focus of religious belief necessarily superhuman? Can it simply be abstract? Can it be concrete?

2. What do you think of Harari’s assessment that Roman persecution of Christians was largely political and relatively minor compared to Christian persecution of Christians (215)? How can Christians respond to the blatantly un-Christ-like behaviour of historical Christians? How can we talk about their deeds with non-Christians who are wary of Christianity because its adherents seem to follow its basic tenants so poorly?

3. What do you think of Harari’s description of Christianity (and Judaism) (217)? What do you think of “syncretism” (223)?

Suggested Answer: Harari suggests that Paul came up with the idea of evangelism, which is probably an unfamiliar proposition to most participants. It is a little uncomfortable to read about Christianity as merely a descendant of polytheism, which is a relative of animism. I am not sure that “the average Christian” really believes in “polytheist saints” and in “animist ghosts,” though perhaps that is an accurate assessment. It is interesting that Harari believes that dualism is not consistent with Christianity, which is a belief also held by many intellectual Christians.

“The Secret of Success”

1. Do you agree that “history cannot be explained deterministically and it cannot be predicted because it is chaotic” (240)?

2. Is history without Christianity conceivable?

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about ideas presented in this week’s assigned chapters.

1.

2.

Module 4: The Scientific Revolution

Chapters covered: “The Discovery of Ignorance,” “The Marriage of Science and Empire,” “The Capitalist Creed,” and “The Wheels of Industry”

Reading and Reflection

“The Discovery of Ignorance”

1. What do you think of the three characteristics that Harari believes set modern science apart from previous traditions of knowledge (250)? Are they good principles? Do you agree that the “revolution of ignorance” launched the Scientific Revolution?

Suggested Answer: It seems unlikely that early civilizations were totally unaware of their own ignorance, though perhaps, as Harari says, individual and traditional ignorance is different from collective ignorance. The three principles Harari outlines have contributed to the rapid development of human understanding and technology, so they are apparently quite useful.

2. “It was inconceivable that the Bible, the Qur’an or the Vedas were missing out on a crucial secret of the universe...” (251). Based on this statement, it seems likely that Harari believes that the Bible is missing some essential truths. What truths might he be thinking of? Is the absence of those truths relevant? If a truth is not present in Scripture, does that mean that it is generally unimportant?

Suggested Answer: Though Scripture does not describe biological evolution in detail or explain the particulars of particle physics, it does convey the important truths of the Christian faith, namely our sin, God’s grace, and the death and resurrection of our Saviour. Perhaps Harari believes that Scripture should be an all-encompassing guide to natural law as well as an account of God’s relationship with His people.

3. Do you agree that “scientific research can flourish only in alliance with some religion or ideology” (274)? What are the implications of this statement?

“The Marriage of Science and Empire”

1. What do you think it would have been like to live in Europe at a time when new continents were being “discovered”? Would the appearance of lands not referenced in Scripture have led to a crisis of faith? Why do you think that Scripture is silent on the subject of South America (or North America, or Antarctica, or Australia)? What does this silence tell you about the scope of Scripture and the role accommodation plays?

2. “What made Europeans exceptional was their unparalleled and insatiable ambition to explore and conquer” (291). Do you think that this is accurate? What might have prompted Europeans to develop this attitude toward the world? Can vestiges of this attitude be seen today? What are the implications of this attitude?

Suggested Answer: This does seem to be an accurate description of Renaissance Europe’s attitude toward the world. Some have credited the Cultural Mandate found in Genesis 1:28 with European Christians’ passion for conquering land and un-Christian peoples. Is this a fair assessment? Is conquering compatible with Christianity?

3. What do you think of the apparently scientifically-supported prejudices of the Aryans? Where do you see similar prejudices today?

“The Capitalist Creed”

1. Do you think that Harari’s interpretation of Matthew 19:24 is accurate (i.e. Jesus says it is difficult for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God because by being rich they are forcing other people to be poor)? Why or why not?

2. Which view of the economy makes more sense to you, the “limited pie” view or the “ever-growing pie” view?

“The Wheels of Industry”

1. What do you think of Harari’s description of animal industries (i.e. dairies, hatcheries)? Do you think that his descriptions are accurate? If so, are you comfortable with the way these industries view animals? Do we have an obligation to look out for the social and psychological needs of animals?

Suggested Answer: Harari’s descriptions do not accurately portray all dairies, hatcheries, etc. However, he is correct in asserting that an animal’s wellbeing is not a priority for many industrial farms. How do industrial farms fit with our calling to steward the created world?

2. What do you think of Harari’s contrast between humankind’s failure to emulate Christ but enthusiastic commitment to obeying the creed of the “capitalist-consumerist ideal” (349)? What are the implications of faithfully adhering to the religion of capitalist-consumerism?

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about ideas presented in this week’s assigned chapters.

1.

2.

Module 5: The Modern World

Chapters covered: “A Permanent Revolution,” “And They Lived Happily Ever After,” “The End of *Homo Sapiens*,” and “The Animal that Became a God”

Reading and Reflection

“A Permanent Revolution”

1. What do you think of our growing dependency on timetables and clocks?
2. What do you think of our transition from the “intimate community” structure of society to a Post-Industrial Revolution social model? What are the benefits of the old model? What are the benefits of the new model?
3. What do you think of the idea that recent decades are more peaceful than previous eras of human history? What do you think about the idea that suicide rates match or exceed war-related mortality rates?

“And They Lived Happily Ever After”

1. What do you think the purpose of the “breathtaking series of revolutions” has been? Is progress inevitable? Are revolutions part of human nature?

2. Do you agree that “Every new invention just puts another mile between us and the Garden of Eden” (378)?

3. What do you think contributes to a person’s happiness? Do you think that the pursuit of happiness is a worthwhile endeavour?

4. “Hence, *any* meaning that people ascribe to their lives is just a delusion” (391). What do you think of this statement? How would you explain or defend your response to this statement to a person like Harari?

“The End of *Homo Sapiens*”

1. What do you think of Harari’s idea that humans are replacing natural selection with intelligent design (in which humans are the intelligent designers) (397)?

2. What do you think of “reviving extinct creatures” (402)? Is this application of science permissible? Is it good?

3. What do you think of altering human genomes?

4. Are the three forms of human manipulation Harari describes “playing God”? Is playing God a bad thing?

Suggested Answer: These forms of manipulation are means of steering the development of the created world, which is akin to playing God. Arguably, humans are called to “play God,” to a degree. God has given humans the capacity to be co-creators, and that involves cultivating parts of the Creation. Manipulation of Creation is not wholly wicked. But is manipulation of humankind going too far? Has God given us permission to manipulate ourselves?

“Afterword: The Animal that Became a God”

1. Do you agree that people view themselves as gods accountable to no one? What are the implications of the attitudes Harari describes in the afterword?

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about ideas presented in this week’s assigned chapters.

1.

2.

Bibliography

Harari, Y. N. (2015). *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. New York: Harper Collins.